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UNCLAS NASSAU 00056

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INFO: POL DCM

DISSEMINATION: AMB /1
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: DCM:HARDTDB
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INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 000056

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR WHA/CAR

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BF](#)

SUBJECT: MP'S SURPRISE RESIGNATION UPSETS POLITICAL
CALCULUS, UNDERMINES OPPOSITION LEADERSHIP

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The opposition PLP lost a seat in parliament January 9 as a Nassau MP resigned suddenly and declared himself an independent. The MP's defection undermines the PLP leadership's post-election strategy of contesting three races in election court in hopes of overturning the governing FNM's slim parliamentary majority. The resignation, which was accompanied by a blistering exchange within the PLP leadership, is a blow to the embattled PLP leader, former Prime Minister Perry Christie. In advance of a planned party convention in February, the MP's defection is certain to reopen debate about Christie's record and the need for strategic changes following the PLP's shock election defeat in May 2007. The unexpected resignation has bared to the public the in-fighting and backstabbing that had plagued the PLP during its time in office and has only intensified following the PLP's loss. The turnabout in parliamentary fortunes eases pressure on the FNM government as it struggles to deal with daunting challenges of crime and stagnating tourism numbers. END SUMMARY.

SURPRISE DEFECTION

12. (U) Opposition MP Kenyatta Gibson shocked Bahamian politics and the public by announcing his resignation from the opposition Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) in a two-page media statement January 9, citing changes in personal convictions but no specific grievances. He becomes the only independent in a parliament now divided 23-17-1 in favor of the governing Free National Movement (FNM). Gibson's defection turns the PLP leadership's post-election strategy

of contesting three races in election court in hopes of overturning the governing FNM's slim parliamentary majority from desperate to irrelevant. With the PLP's parliamentary strength reduced by one, the party would be unable to form a majority even in the unlikely event that all three election challenges were to end in victories in court. Gibson could continue to vote with the PLP, but his very public and acrimonious departure would be rendered meaningless in that case, given the small policy differences and emphasis on personality and patronage politics in both parties.

INSULTS FLY

13. (U) The surprise resignation not only upsets the PLP's post-election calculus, but further undermines the already weak position of PLP Leader Perry Christie who, like the rest of the party, was reportedly "blindsided" by the news. Gibson was initially circumspect in his resignation statement: "I do not intend to spend the entirety of this parliamentary session defending legacies and decisions to promote the advancement of the few." But in reply to Christie, who characterized the resignation as an act of "political treachery" and called for him to give up his parliamentary seat, Gibson unleashed a hail of invective. His subsequent statement called Christie "reptilian", "washed up" and a "cowardly bully," who was an "expert proponent of self aggrandizement." Asserting that Christie was no longer fit to lead the party, he described Christie as an "arch-mediocrity, captain of all things small and petty, master of all things which are insignificant and void." Quoting from Oliver Cromwell, he concluded: "Depart I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!"

14. (SBU) Gibson's resignation came only days after the PLP Spokesman, ex-Foreign Minister Fred Mitchell, sought to downplay in a media statement the likelihood of any leadership challenges at the upcoming PLP convention. On the contrary, Gibson's strategically timed announcement on the eve of the anniversary of the PLP's achievement of majority rule in 1967, added insult to injury by upstaging the party's commemoration. It has also intensified questions about Christie's viability as opposition leader -- already under pressure from the shock election defeat in May 2007. Already, Christie's record of leadership and the need for strategic changes have been widely bandied about in the press in advance of a planned party convention in February.

RELIEF FOR EMBATTLED FNM

15. (SBU) Striking like a thunderbolt out of a clear blue sky, news of Gibson's resignation came just in time to become the top story on evening news broadcasts and morning newspaper headlines, pushing all other current affairs aside. The media splash handed the FNM a bit of unexpected relief after months of pressure from negative crime stories and unfavorable tourism numbers, coupled with stinging opposition attacks over both. The FNM's presumed courtship of another MP whose allegiance to the PLP may be shaky, Malcolm Adderley, may also return to center stage. Speculation about Adderley's loyalties returned to the forefront recently after Prime Minister Ingraham reappointed him to a two-year position as Chairman of the Gaming Board, the sole PLP member to hold on to such a position after the May 2007 elections. While the urgency of such an effort might wane, the prospects for another defection cannot be ruled out.

COMMENT: MOUNTING PLP FACTIONALISM

16. (SBU) Gibson's resignation is a big nail in Perry Christie's political coffin. It will intensify pressure for Christie to step aside for new leadership. It also eases political pressure on the FNM government, which is expecting

to win ongoing court challenges to three seats by the PLP. It is ironic that this attack came from Gibson, who was one of the MP's involved in a high-profile fistcuffs in the cabinet office earlier this year. Christie's unwillingness to replace Gibson fed the image of his indecisiveness as a leader, and of the PLP as a party without internal discipline. Christie no doubt feels personally betrayed for having stood by Gibson only to have Gibson bite his hand. The resignation has laid bare the factional lines in the party, with the party's official website now being used to criticize other members, and those members in turn publicly criticizing the party's own website. For the foreseeable future, the PLP will be distracted and consumed with its ongoing internal disarray and lack of direction. The party convention, if and when it is held, may not resolve even the leadership crisis. Christie had indicated to Post that he would stay on only as long as the PLP had a realistic chance of being named the victor in the contested seats. With this defection and the (just announced) FNM victory in the first court challenge, it is likely that Christie will now step aside unless the factionalism is so strong that no consensus can be reached on a successor.

SIEGEL